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ABSTRACT

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an intergovernmental association of 24 nations which approaches issues from an economic perspective. Education finds a place in the OECD because of the organization's realization that economic growth increasingly depends upon a highly educated and trained work force and that, in political systems that depend upon government by assent, democratic institutions and social order rest upon the foundations of a well-educated community. The programs of OECD are developed on the basis of an assessment of interests or issues that arise among member states. The OECD's educational activities address five major goals: (1) strengthening the knowledge base about education to foster international comparisons and cooperation; (2) improving the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of countries' educational endeavors; (3) equalizing educational opportunities and making special provision for at-risk or handicapped children and youth; (4) preparing for a continued increase in adults' participation in upper secondary, higher, and adult continuing education; and (5) developing the vocational orientation of education and upgrading the overall competence of the work force. Systematic and structured early intervention programs can improve the prospects for effective learning at later stages of growth, and minimize problems such as school failure and poor motivation. (MM)

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European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education
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The Utility of Early Childhood Education: An OECD View

Malcolm Skilbeck - OECD Paris

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"Do you not know, then, that the beginning in every task is the chief thing, especially for any creature that is young and tender?" (1)

I. Introduction

I shall start by disclaiming any specialised knowledge or authority in relation to early childhood education, other than, first, the common experience of parenthood - and with five children that is extremely common place for me - and second, the washover effect of my general experience and responsibilities in education.

Knowing these limitations, the conference organisers clearly had other purposes in mind in inviting me to speak. The first of them is clear enough: someone with responsibilities for educational work in the OECD should not be left in ignorance of the interest and claims of the early childhood community in Europe. I am very happy to accept that challenge, to listen to you and to read and reflect upon the conference documentation.

That, however, would leave me with nothing to say and we have a slot on the conference programme today to occupy. So there is a second purpose in the invitation issued to me, which is to see how far the OECD, in its educational planning and programming, has itself taken up the challenge of early childhood, whether in its current work or in its ideas for the future.

I can best respond to that purpose by indicating both the general philosophies, directions and strategies of our educational programmes and those specific activities in which either directly or indirectly there are

implications and consequences for the field of early childhood education. But, first, I need to say something about the OECD itself - both what it is and what it is not. These initial remarks will, I trust, explain the stance we take, what we attempt to cover and what we omit.

2. The OECD and its Educational Mission

The OECD has an unusual role and standing among the international organisations. The membership extends to 24 countries, the majority of them European but including also Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Japan. On a population count, the non-European members easily outnumber the Europeans. We are not a pan-European but a pan-continental organisation. But the origins of the OECD lie in the economic and social reconstruction of Europe following the second World War and this has always conditioned our work. Together with the membership, history ensures a strong and continuing European orientation. It is an orientation, however, that is significantly different and wider from that of the European bodies without being universal as is the U.N. The OECD is like a three-legged stool. Europe, North America and Asia-Pacific are its principal points of contact with global trends and concerns.

The legs, incidentally, now have substantial embellishments: we have, as so-called "partners-in-transition", the countries of Hungary, Poland and the C.S.F.R, together with an expanding programme that takes in practically all of the countries of the former Soviet Empire. Apart from this, in Asia, special programmes are developing in association with the so-called dynamic economies or tigers of the East: Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan and Hong

Kong. In the Americas, Mexico is showing a strong interest in future membership.

The OECD is then a western style association of nations, a club comprising countries that subscribe to western growth models, whether industrial or post-industrial, - to the market economy, human rights and democratic institutions.

The OECD naturally tends to approach issues from an economic perspective. For example, the Environment directorate has an orientation towards the concept of sustainability; the Science and Industry directorate towards policies that relate science to economy and my directorate, Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, towards the economic bearings of these fields of activity. Education finds a place in the OECD because of the organisation's realisation, dating from the 60s and earlier, that economic growth increasingly depends upon highly educated and trained manpower and that democratic institutions and social order, in political systems that depend upon government by assent, rest upon the foundations of a well-educated community. I draw attention to these crucial political and social dimensions which can too easily be overlooked. But it is undoubtedly for its economic role that member countries over the years have most valued OECD.

What, however, is an "economic orientation"? If one takes into account all that is meant by the production and distribution of wealth - the context, conditions and consequences of economic activity, the policy dimensions as well as economic activity - theory as well as practice - the private and voluntary as well as the public spheres - it is obvious than an economic orientation

itself embodies a substantial part of human affairs and social life.

I have indicated that powerful as it is, this economic orientation is not an exclusive one. In education, for example, we undertake studies and activities which need have no particular or obvious orientation to the economy.

This said, I must add that any topic that is taken up in the OECD is easier to relate to the overall priorities and procedures of the organisation and to gain headway with our membership if broadly defined economic aspects of that topic can be identified and built into the work programme. Early childhood education, for example, raises issues such as women's employment, migration, finance, policy co-ordination across government departments and agencies and the economic and social costs of poor provision as well as the benefits of sound provision. Issues of this kind provide a more ready entrée than some of the more directly pedagogical or philosophical issues which will attract many researchers and scholars.

I realise that the economic flavour of our kind of work disturbs some commentators, including education scholars. We are sometimes seen as an integral part of the dominant power relations of the capitalist state, an agency of reproduction and control. There is a widespread concern among educators that in the international, competitive drive for economic growth, educational philosophies will be narrowed; that, combined with technological evolution, the economic policies of member countries and hence of the OECD itself will reduce education to a merely instrumental and subservient role. In the sphere of early childhood education, concern was voiced recently, for example, by Joachim Liebschner in his history of the National Froebel Society

in Britain[2].

Being aware of these concerns and alert to the risks of co-option is one way in which their impact can be reduced if not wholly eliminated. Let me simply say that our work is subject to the same principles of procedure, public scrutiny and critical debate that inform academic social science with the additional benefit that the analytical work of OECD is policy oriented and must also pass through the sieve of policy relevance and significance.

OECD is an inter-governmental organisation. Its research and other activities are in the service of governments: of what they can be shown by argument and evidence to need if not always what they say they want. Its members are governments and the representatives or delegates to its committees usually come from government departments or agencies. There are exceptions and they are not insignificant; for example, one of the principal instruments for educational work is the CERI - The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. While its membership is national, the governing board includes a number of distinguished educational researchers and scholars: its chairman is a university professor of education. It is most gratifying that some governments see this as an appropriate way of exercising their membership rights. The studies undertaken in CERI include many of direct interest to R and D bodies and to educational scholars.

Before leaving the subject of "what is the OECD", I have two further observations. First, OECD is not a funding body - and is indeed in the business of raising funds to support its projects. Second, the enduring raison d'être of the organisation is member countries' need of a forum: to share

ideas, experiences and knowledge, reach agreements and understandings, review one another's policy and programmes on the principle of peer assessment and find ways of developing and applying knowledge and experience in solving common problems. The OECD is not exactly a think tank but it is an international agency with excellent access to data sources for the development and exchange of social and economic knowledge, ideas and policies.

So much for the Organisation. It is, I hope, useful for you to hear this by way of background and to be able to locate the OECD in your map of the new Europe. However, as early childhood scholars, teachers and researchers you will want to know whether our educational work takes due account of the professional and academic interests you represent. I will address this question by drawing out implications of several of our major areas of activity and outlining our plans for future work directly in the sphere of early childhood education.

3. Main lines of the Education Programme

I have pointed out that OECD is an inter-governmental organisation which ministers to the needs and interests of its members. This means that its programmes are developed, with Secretariat assistance, on the basis of an assessment of those interests and of hypotheses about major problems or issues that have arisen or may be emerging among member states. What are these interests, issues and problems as seen from the standpoint of education and training?

In the space of a single talk, I cannot give a detailed enumeration,

which in any case would be rather tedious and it is available in our published Programme of Work[3]. What I shall do is indicate a number of major themes, explain why each of them has been identified as a target for studies and collaborative activities among member countries to be carried out now and over the next couple of years, and to suggest some links between them and early childhood education.

The themes or areas I have selected from our 1993 Programme of Work (yet to be ratified by the Council of the OECD) are:

1. Strengthen the international knowledge base for comparative and co-operative work.

2. Improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of countries' educational endeavours.

3. Equalising educational opportunities and making special provision for children and youth who are at risk or handicapped.

4. Preparing for the impending massification of higher and adult, continuing education.

5. Developing the vocational orientation of education and upgrading the overall competence of the workforce.

Although this list of 5 principal clusters or themes does not exhaust

the range of our educational activities, it gives the flavour of many of them. First, there is the need to strengthen the knowledge base for international comparison and co-operation. As a generalization, let me say that the knowledge base for educational decision-making, planning, review, assessment and evaluation is generally inadequate. This is of course true for national systems as well as internationally and it is a well-founded complaint of national R and D bodies, researchers in universities and thoughtful policy makers and administrators that national budgets for education contain a disproportionately low allocation for R and D. This point came out strongly in a recent international conference on educational research(4).

Similarly, the kinds of strategic research needed to inform decision makers is often lacking because of the limitations on long term funding and for other reasons that can be addressed. In a recent report, "The Migrant Head Start Program," it was stated that, since 1970 "no vigorous study has examined the impact of Head Start on specific communities - on ethnic minority communities or, ... the communities that provide Head Start for migrant children"(5). And this despite the American policy emphasis on targeted intervention and the prominence of Head Start among all forms of early intervention. This is but one illustration; I could give you many more.

Despite considerable progress, public education is still too often at the mercy of prejudice and ill-informed criticism or myth making on the one hand and, on the other, of superficial policies, many of which fail to address their own objectives. The overall level of investment in educational research and development is much too low, given the scale of the enterprise and its fundamental importance for individual and social well being. These

shortcomings are reflected in the international environment where our statistics are often superficial and usually dated and our capacity to make valid and scientifically significant comparisons among countries extremely limited. For that reason, and because they are acutely sensitive to the increasing globalization of international relations in the economic, social, cultural political and other spheres - governments are coming to accept the need for a substantial improvement in international education and training data bases, both discursive and non-discursive. Within the OECD, there is substantial interest in developing a set of international educational indicators, for example[6], and among many countries, in improving the exchange of information on educational policies and their impact - on legislation, on programmes that work and on the collective setting of standards and targets for future development. We are not, in the OECD, as well placed and resourced for this work as we should and might be, but we see the need and are responding. As yet, these data sets provide relatively little information or guidance on either early childhood or adult education including work-specific training. The main reason is that national systems themselves lack proper methods and controls for gaining this information. We know too little about spheres where private and voluntary effort, as distinct from public provision, prevail.

My <u>second</u> theme relates to the very great interest in all countries in ways of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of education at all stages. This interest - which in some countries has reached obsessional levels - results not only from awareness by the authorities of the huge costs of education to the public exchequers. It also reflects the rapid pace of globalization and countries' awareness that educational quality, at an affordable price and well diffused throughout the whole system, is a condition

of present and future living standards and national well being. Critics see this as an over-zealous concern for international competitiveness, as a distortion of educational values and the interests of young people in the face of economic imperatives. There are indeed grounds for concern, but they do not lessen the need for or potential impact of the drive toward quality, efficiency and effectiveness in national policy making. The drive is, I think best seen not so much as an attack on educational values as part of a much wider shift in the balance between the public and private sectors in many countries. It also arises from a concern that in many of its effects, education is not achieving democratic, liberal and humanistic values. High dropout and failure rates, low levels of attainment and performance, poor preparation for career or further higher education choices, ineffectual teaching, low motivation and slovenly work habits among children are evidence that the goals and values of liberal democratic societies and not merely cost-conscious capitalist economies are not being adequately met. At any rate, the approach we are taking to these concerns is to mobilise countries' interests in school effectiveness in a context wherein devolutionary trends and enhancement of school-level responsibilities are evident and where quality concerns extend to the needs of all students and not only the future elites of professionals and managers.

This approach helps to explain a <u>third</u> major area of our work which I have called Equalising educational opportunities and making special provision for students who are at risk or handicapped. The scope of this work is considerable, embracing various forms of handicap - physical, intellectual, emotional, social in both children and older adolescents.

Those at risk or liable to adverse discrimination and deprivation

because of known social and cultural factors are a proper object of concern for reasons no less humanitarian than economic. Indeed it is in this broad range of activities that the interests of social justice, humanitarianism, social utility and economic efficiency combine in a visible fashion. None is sufficient by itself since the issues are usually complex and obdurate. Within the rationale that has emerged for public policy intervention in spheres that historically have been the concern of voluntary bodies and charities where they were not the victims of sheer neglect, each of the factors I have named is important.

The democratic philosophy carries with it commitments in the public domain to addressing basic human needs and reducing inequality. The public costs, both economic and social, of providing long term care argue for support for early intervention as either preventative or ameliorative. Humanitarian impulses are at work in ensuring that the support and care programmes reach acceptable standards. Changing patterns of employment, especially for women, and of family life call for new policy responses - and so on. These, at least, are the directions taken in our work and while, in some cases, they are still well ahead of practice or even policy commitments in member countries, they correspond well to the aspirations and intentions of the relevant communities including ministries of education, health, employment and social security in most member countries. Our task is to foster research and development projects, to evaluate and synthesise, drawing attention to successes and failures, to publish the results, to assist and advise in the development of policy and to draw attention to the implications and consequences of policy changes.

Apart from a new programme directly in early childhood education, it is in our work on children and youth "at risk" that the needs of very young children and their families have most recently surfaced. Statistics and issues raised in several country reports demonstrate serious gaps and disparities in policy and provision in member countries. In the United States, for example, the diversity, uneveness and individualism of provision, both custodial and developmental, reflect the historical reluctance or failure to develop public educational policies for the under fives.

Inevitably, low income families significantly are under-represented in kindergarten enrolments even where provision is good. In the U.S., one half of the mothers of children under six years of age work and 2/3 of those work full time. The demand for early childhood services is growing and both federal and state programmes are expected to respond, especially through the schools sector(7). Germany is another country where the demand is growing and the need is great. Although - at least in the former West Germany - the percentage of mothers of children aged 6 or less who are employed (33 per cent) is much lower than in the U.S., provision is quite inadequate. "In most regions and communities in West Germany, the available day care facilities are not even able to take all children [0-3 years] of gainfully employed single mothers, while on the other hand for most of them, work is the only chance to remain economically independent(8)." Furthermore, where kindergarten provision is adequate - as is also the case in the U.S. - least use is made of it by the lowest income group, the unemployed and those receiving social welfare benefits. By contrast, in France and to a lesser extent Sweden, there have been for many years comprehensive policies and programmes, which demonstrate a responsiveness to drastically changed conditions especially for women. In

Sweden, 83 per cent of women with children of preschool age are gainfully employed and - an unusual but welcome statistic - fathers of infant children are more extensively employed than other men[9].

Of all the OECD member countries, perhaps it is France that provides the most comprehensive demonstration of the value of a comprehensive framework of legislation, policies and programme provision for children of preschool age. There, nursery schools are widely available and used, more so in the large urban areas but still throughout the nation. They offer well defined educational programmes conducted by trained professionals and form part of a continuum child care and education from childbirth to adulthood. Moreover, the Ministry of Education is able to produce research data on the cumulative effect on children's' school learning of their preschool experiences, something all national ministries should organize[10].

I do not suggest that France is a model for other countries. Each must find its own solutions and the French system is far from perfect even in its own terms. The point is, however, that France is serious. There has been: a serious appraisal of need; a readiness to face the challenge; large scale endeavour in policy making, institutional development, provision of services, the allocation of trained personnel and resources, and R and D. These are among the conditions that I would like to see all countries meeting.

My <u>fourth</u> theme is the rapid increase in participation rates in upper secondary, higher and continuing education among many OECD countries. A major factor is undoubtedly the collapse of the youth employment market. Few, if any, analysts are now predicting the recovery of that market. We appear to be

witnessing the disappearance of the option of full-time paid work for adolescents and indeed many young adults. Of these three - paid employment, unemployment and some form of further continuing or higher education - is is the third that is winning out in member-country thinking. Countries are gearing up for mass and eventually universal systems of post-secondary and higher education and training. Whereas, until relatively recently, the emphasis was on transition from school to work, increasingly now it is from school to yet more school or training. This may at first glance appear to be a further set-back for early childhood education whose interests have been adversely affected by the vocational training drive and the funds thereby marshalled, and now seem to be jeopardised by the need governments feel to build up the educational institutions and programmes for adolescents and young adults. I say "appear" because policies leading to universal schooling in the years leading up to early adulthood, with one hopes, universal employment for both sexes thereafter, should open up the prospect of universal child care. That is, at least, something for the community of early childhood education to work on.

Of the themes in our work programme that I have identified, the fifth is the vocational orientation of education and the upgrading of the overall competence of the workforce. Interest in this field is of course a direct consequence of the economic strategy which sees investment in a highly competent and flexible workforce as a key to growth. There are economists who, subscribing to so-called new growth theories, place education alongside research and development as a key factor in sustained economic growth. Although it does not follow from this that specifically vocational education merits particular attention, there is an increasing interest, in most if not

all countries and by no means confined to the OECD, in the reform and further development of vocational education at all levels, from the years of secondary schooling to work-based retraining programmes for adults. As with higher education, there will be a temptation for early childhood educators to regard the vocational movement as a rival for resources and favourable attention by government. What is necessary here, I believe, is to draw attention to the importance of sound early childhood education programmes as a foundation for later learning, and to do so not rhetorically but by tracing the links and pathways of development.

4. A programme in early childhood education

After many years when the subject has been off the visible agenda, the OECD Education Committee has recently included early childhood as an area in which we are to undertake empirical and analytical work during the next two to three years. The rationale, and hence, the likely direction of this activity runs as follows: Evidence from a wide variety of sources points to the need for early intervention through educational programmes of a systematic, structured, developmental kind to satisfy two purposes. First, the prospects for effective learning at later stages of growth, adolescence as well as childhood, are presumed to be improved when positive attitudes, skills and interest in learning are systematically fostered at a very early growth stage, not later than three years of age. Second, as a corollary of this, problems of school failure, dropout, under-motivation and low standards of performance are presumed to be largely avoided or minimised through well targeted childhood educational programmes, again from the age of two or three years and upwards.

These points are not at all new in the history of pedagogy and perfectly familiar to early childhood educators. But they constitute the groundwork for hypotheses to be tested and developmental programmes to be evaluated, if they are not to become yet another branch of conventional wisdom. There are additional points in this necessary groundwork to which we shall be attending. They include the widely expressed need for professional childcare services in response to the increasing rate of employment among women and changing family structures and the continuing urbanisation and mobility of the population which increase demands for comprehensive services. Moreover, in recognition of the multiplicity of not always well articulated and co-ordinated services for very young children and their parents: health, welfare and social security, employment and education, there appears to be a need for policy coherence and services integration, for studies which examine the gaps, duplications and inconsistencies in these services and ways of strengthening them in a co-ordinated fashion. Our primary interest at this stage in the work programme is less in the educational content and processes - in curriculum and teaching methods - of early childhood and more in the overall policies, frameworks for action, resource issues and inter-relationship among the actors.

There are many questions to answer: What is the role of government and public agencies as distinct from private providers and voluntary bodies? Should governments, for example, develop the policy framework and monitor provision and performance against that framework, or should they provide programmes and resources on a large scale - say for universal education from two years of age and onwards?

Should parents and families be encouraged to assist to nurture and care

for young children or is it preferable to move toward an ever increasing professionalisation of these roles and responsibilities? What are the longer term benefits, both in terms of improved quality of learning and financial costs, of different kinds of early intervention programmes; what are the costs, social and interpersonal as well as economic? What are the predictable consequences of delaying entry to formal schooling or pre-schooling to ages four, five, six or even seven? Are these consequences generalizable or are they meaningful only in specific national and cultural settings? If early intervention is adopted as a policy - as for example in France through the widespread public provision of creches and preschools - what are the strategic points within that provision for review, research and concentrated efforts? And, finally, what are the best sources of knowledge, expertise and experience upon which policy makers can draw and how can they be mobilised in international co-operative studies and programmes?

These questions are not exhaustive and I hope you will take them as an initiation, not only to conjure with the issues, but also to focus your own thinking in positive ways on the oft-repeated complaint that early childhood education is the "Cinderella" of the education service. If it is so, part of the explanation no doubt lies in the perceived distance, the gaps and discontinuities, between the tasks of development in early childhood and the returns to society in the form of learning outcome and the successful performance of adult roles. It always seems possible to catch up, or later learning seems to be more complex, more serious, more worthy of investment. While I do not in the least share this naive view of the processes and returns of education from early childhood into adulthood, I do understand and sympathise with the policy-makers' need to make these links more explicit, to

back up the claims with strong bodies of evidence and to place the issues into a policy framework which inevitably means using economic, social and political forms of analysis as well as pedagogical ones.

In all this, I would pay particular attention to the ways in which governments of whatever political persuasion are shifting the locus of their concern and responsibilities. They are moving away from the role of provider and financier, which, in public education, has been the mainstay of system development in many countries for a century or more. The roles government are more interested in now are: to target their direct controlling and financial interest to specific groups; to legislate and develop overall policies or policy frameworks which foster and encourage rather than directly control; to monitor, evaluate and use a variety of devices, often indirect, to regulate, encourage or circumscribe; and to establish partnerships with and among key players in the community notably employers, unions and large sectional interests. No government which does not already do so is at all likely in the foreseeable future itself to set up and finance universal provision of early childhood education. But perhaps all governments can be persuaded that major developments in which they ought to have a vital interest, are needed. It is one of the aims of the work we are embarking on in early childhood education to show governments what this intent amounts to in a detailed overview of needs, priorities, and possibilities for action. I hope and believe they will be encouraged to respond in practical and effective ways in developing or strengthening their educational policies and programmes for the youngest members of our societies. But we must temper our optimism with awareness of the shadow that falls between the idea and the act. I have already mentioned Sweden's inability to achieve its own legislative objective of provision to

match demand. I end with a quotation: "The European Ministers of Education ... recommend that governments continue as fully as possible in the establishment of nursery schools, particularly in rural areas [and]...bring the concepts of primary school teaching into line with those which have proved successful in nursery schools." When did the Ministers say that? In 1969[11]. We still have a long way to go.

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